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**A camera report on**

**EL CERRITO**

**a typical Spanish-American  
community in New Mexico**

***by* IRVING RUSINOW**





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**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE**



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## NOTE

This camera report on El Cerrito is the first of six to be published by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics. Each deals with a community typical of an area or group in the United States. They are designed to serve as companion books for a series of six technical publications relating to the same six communities, resulting from studies carried on by the Bureau during 1940. The first of these, *The Village of El Cerrito, New Mexico*, is now available. The other five communities studied are Grafton County, N. H.; Lancaster County, Pa.; Putnam County, Ga.; Haskell County, Kans.; and Shelby County, Iowa.

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## FRONTISPIECE IN WORDS

El Cerrito is located in San Miguel County, N. Mex., 28 miles south of Las Vegas. It was settled early in the nineteenth century by two families that owned great flocks of sheep and by other families that made their living working for the stockmen. The land was not well suited to farming, for the growing season was short and the rainfall variable and often insufficient; but there was room in the valley for irrigated fields where people could produce the food they needed. Each family owned a little plot of land, a horse or two, a cow, and perhaps a pig.

The principal source of income was livestock. Thousands of acres around the village—part of a huge Spanish land grant—were covered with bunch grass. There was more pasture than could be used. When one part of the area was

overgrazed, men simply moved their herds to another part. No one thought very much about conserving the land. There was always more to be had for the taking.

As time passed, a few more families were able to build up herds of their own, but always the majority of the people were dependent on the stockmen. Fortunately, the latter recognized their responsibility and accepted it. Even those who were not regularly on a "patron's" pay roll were given work to do when they needed money. The only really independent pursuit of the people was cultivation of the irrigated land.

The early economy of El Cerrito was one of abundance. Every man had everything he needed, and the patrons grew rich. No one tried to live by farming the land.

**EL CERRITO • I**

Today, these people and their descendants have lost nearly all of their once vast holdings. They still own the small, inadequate, irrigated fields that were never sufficient, alone, to support all the people of the village; but the mesa land, which supported the all-important livestock industry, has passed into other hands. The ownership of much of it, granted by the Spanish and Mexican Governments, has been voided by the courts. Even more land has been sold for taxes.

Though the community began losing its land several decades ago, the full effect of this loss was not felt until recently. The railroads were coming in and people found that they could earn more by cutting ties than by working for the sheepmen. After the tracks were laid, labor scouts came in from the mines, metal works, and beet fields of the north, offering work for everyone. This period of prosperity last-

ed until the 1920's. Then with the coming of the depression, jobs grew scarce and the people returned to the villages and the land.

It was only then that they realized what had happened during their absence. There was no more grazing land. Homesteaders had taken up some of the mesa and had fenced it so that a man who owned a tract 2 miles away might have to go 10 miles to reach it. Big concerns had obtained control of the grazing and water rights.

The people did what they could. They farmed the land, grew a little food, worked whenever they could get work, sold whatever they could sell. But all they could do was not enough to keep them off relief. San Miguel County soon became one of the most heavily subsidized in the State.

Now, several years later, conditions in the village are almost unchanged. In general, agricultural programs do not fit the situation



that exists here. There can be little hope of rehabilitating the people on their present holdings, and self-liquidating loans are not feasible.

The communities persist, not because of economic conditions, but in spite of them. The people, being a distinct racial and linguistic group, hold fast to customs and traditions. They are devoted to their village and they resist change. They must, as individuals, find opportunities for self-expression and appreciation within their own culture, among their own people. When they leave their villages, they go out among strangers. Their thoughts are always of home and when they will return there. They distrust outsiders. Everyone knows of people who have lost land and money at the hands of shrewd dealing "Anglos." Because of this, even the poorest men rarely sell or even mortgage their houses and irrigated land.

There is a great deal of loyalty

among the people of the village, loyalty to each other and to the village as a whole. And the fact that almost all the families are related to each other binds them together by blood ties as well as community relationships. Marriage within the group is common.

The Church, too, serves to hold the community together, and its influence on the people is profound. All are devout Catholics; all try to live their lives according to teachings of their Church.

Here, then, is a village until recently pretty much apart from the rest of the world. But resources have so dwindled and opportunities so shrunk that the people are convinced that radical changes must be made in their way of life. And many think that these changes will mean the end of some of the customs and traditions and values that have always been of the first importance—the things, in fact, that have made life worth living.

## THE VILLAGE

It is 28 miles from Las Vegas to the village; 16 miles of paved road, 3 of improved dirt road, and the rest a twisting, shifting track over the high mesa. The country is rough and broken, spotted with piñon, cedar, and juniper—very dry land without much grass on it.





You come upon the village suddenly. The road cuts sharply to the right, and you find yourself on the edge of a cliff looking down into a little, almost circular valley—a land pocket cut by the Pecos River, which now swings across its floor in a huge double S before vanishing through a cut in the cliffs.

There are 20-odd houses in the village, buff-colored or pinkish, with dark shingle or bright iron roofs. The fruit trees are in luxuriant bloom. The place is like an oasis in the dry mesa land.

It is very quiet. This is a holy day and the people are not in their fields.





Even from close at hand the houses seem neat and well-kept. They are all plastered with adobe, but some of them are made of stone.

Only the oldest have flat roofs and solid adobe walls.





Being here is like being in another land:





El Cerrito has its own character, . . .





. . . very different from that of rural communities in other parts of the country.

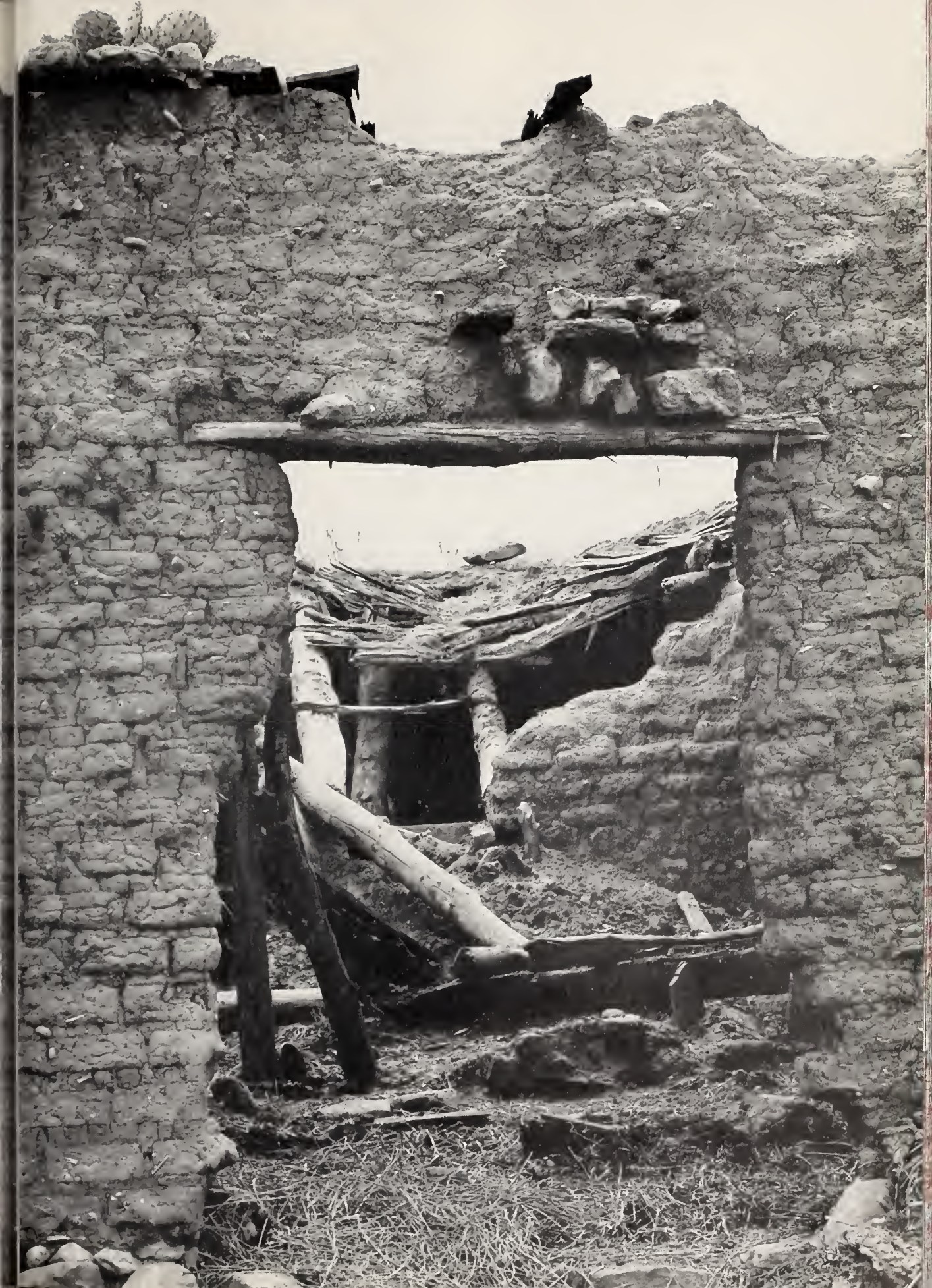




The oldest buildings were made of adobe bricks. These soon melt away when people cease to take care of them.

Things have been pretty hard here in the past 10 or 12 years, and you see a few abandoned homes; this in spite of the fact that most of the villagers would rather live here in poverty than elsewhere in reasonable comfort.







There is evidence here of the culture of Spain and that of the Southwestern Indians and a few traces of our own culture.

The village belongs here, fits into this country: And the country is like no other region.



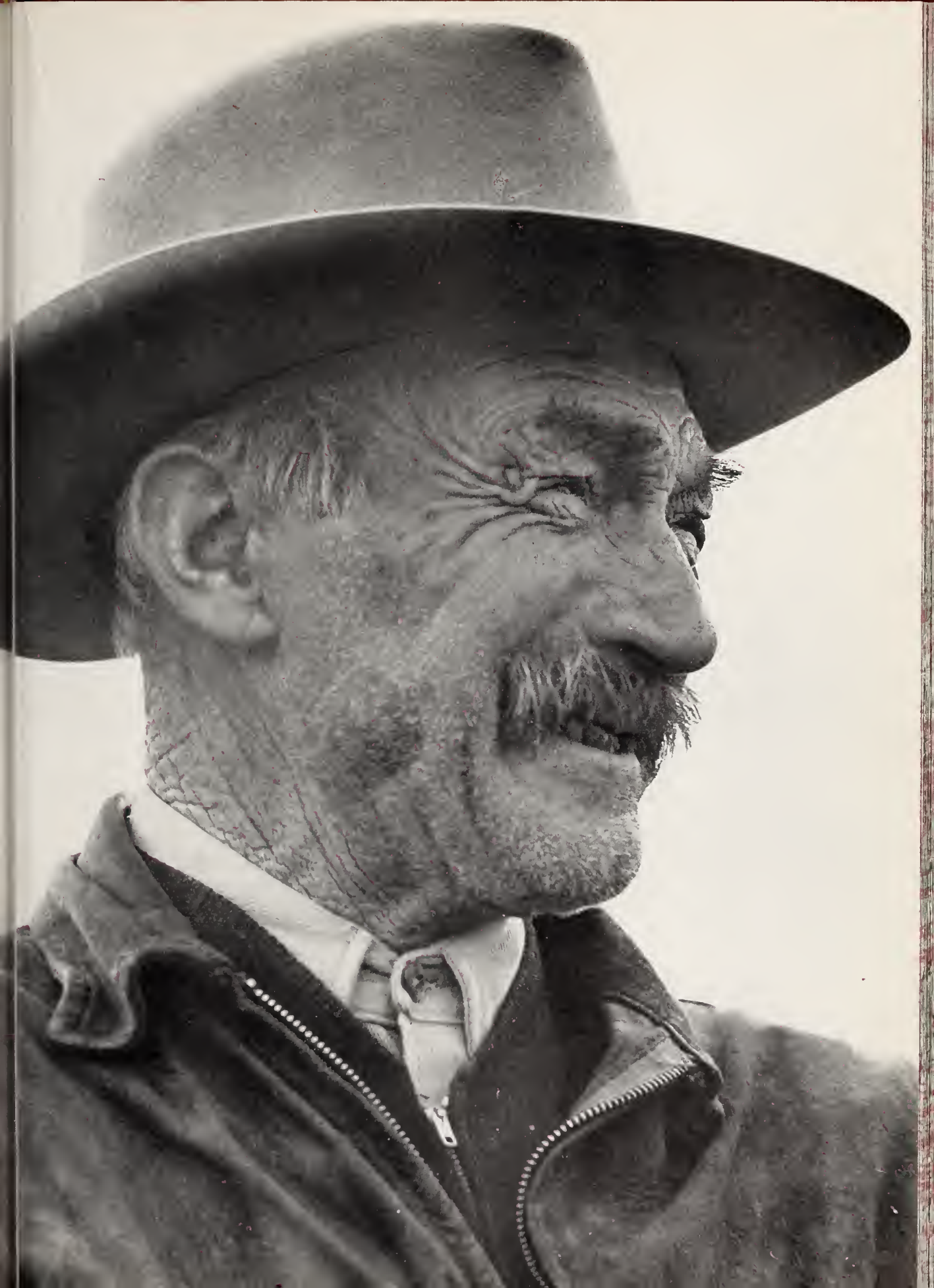


## THE PEOPLE

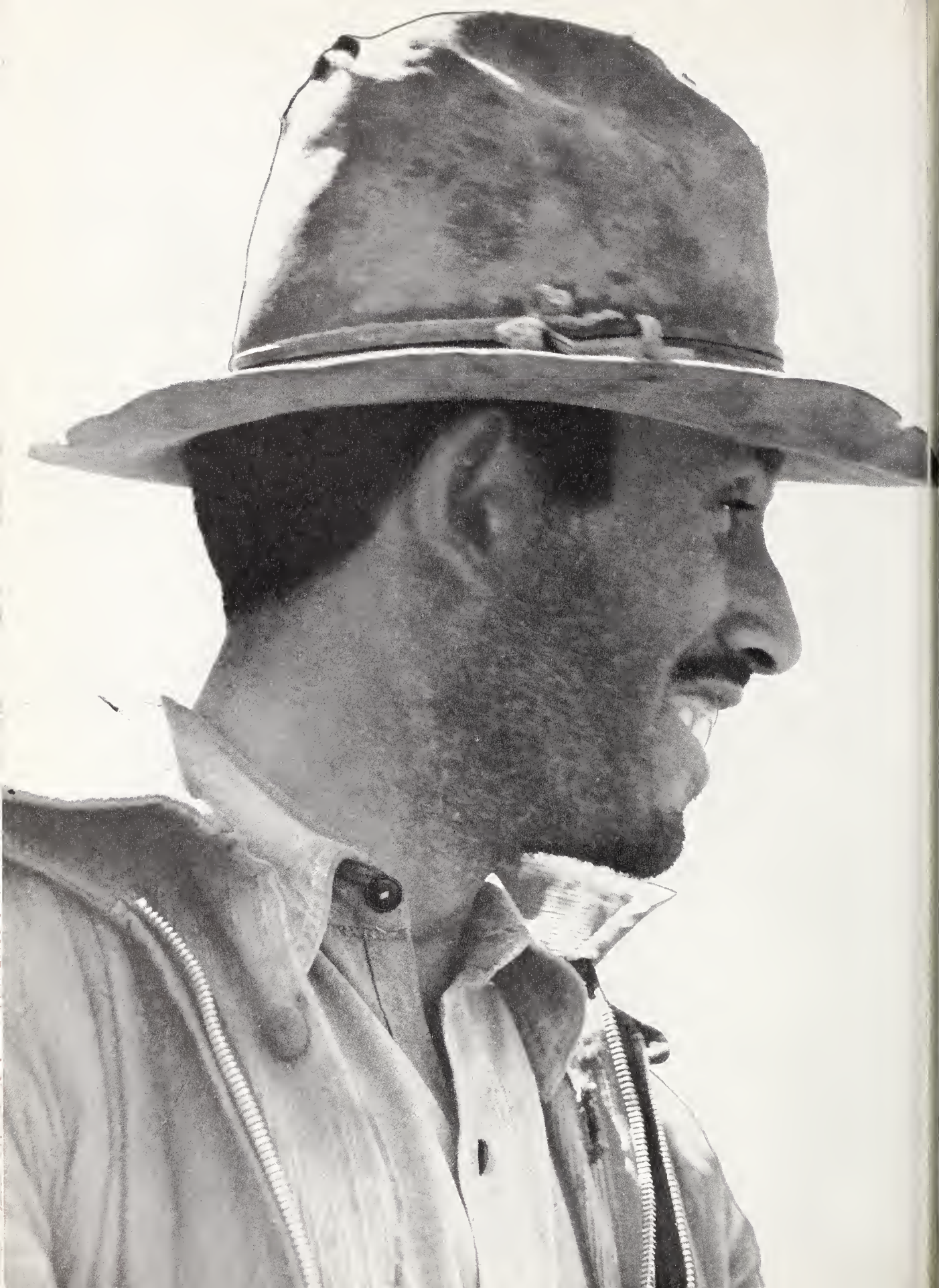
You meet some of the people.

They are friendly . . .









. . . and interested, . . .







. . . curious . . .





. . . and suspicious.





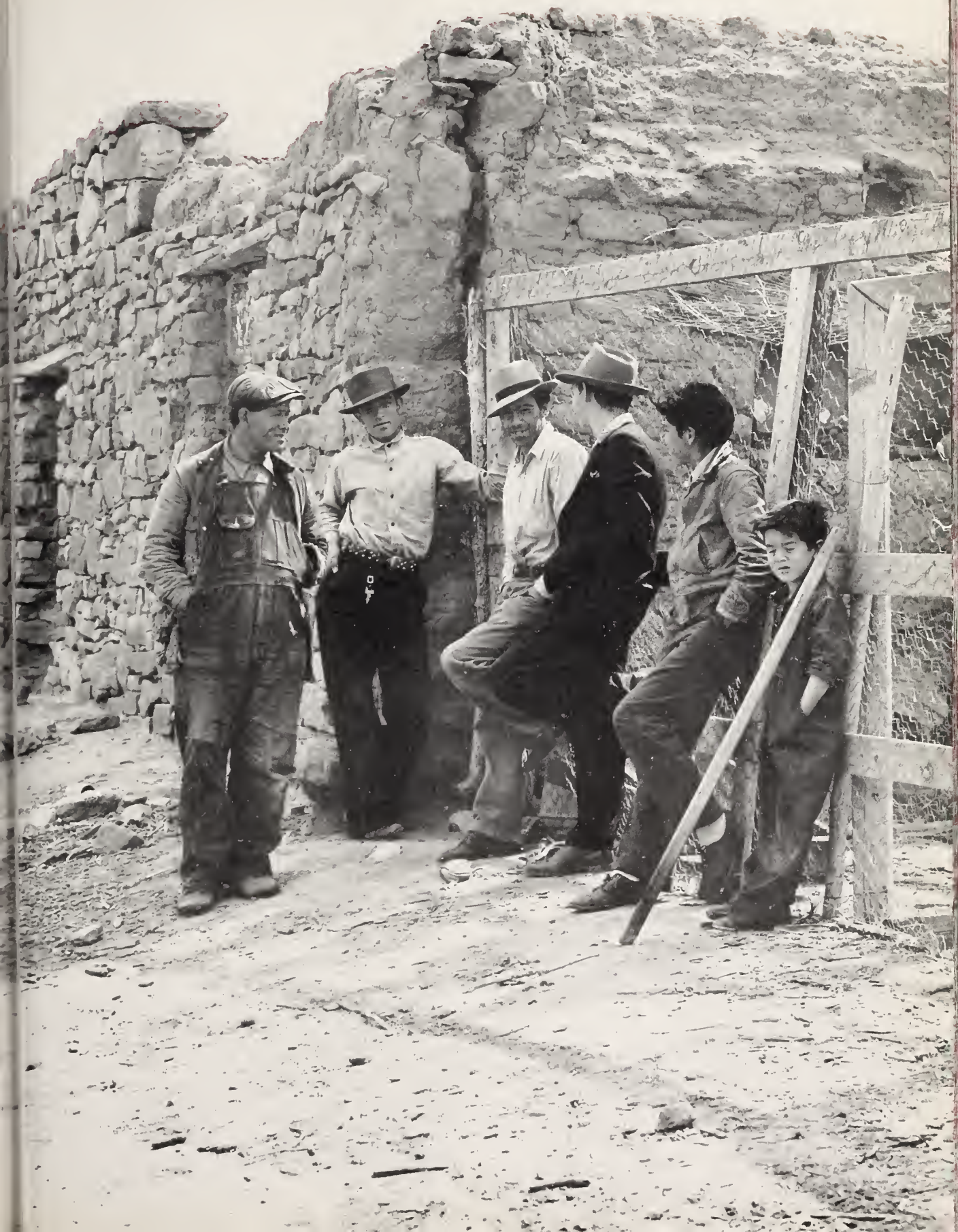
They have little reason to think that any Anglo is sincerely interested in them or concerned about their problems. Strangers have sometimes done them harm, rarely helped them.





Small groups of men and boys talk in the shade. They speak always in Spanish and many of them have no other language.





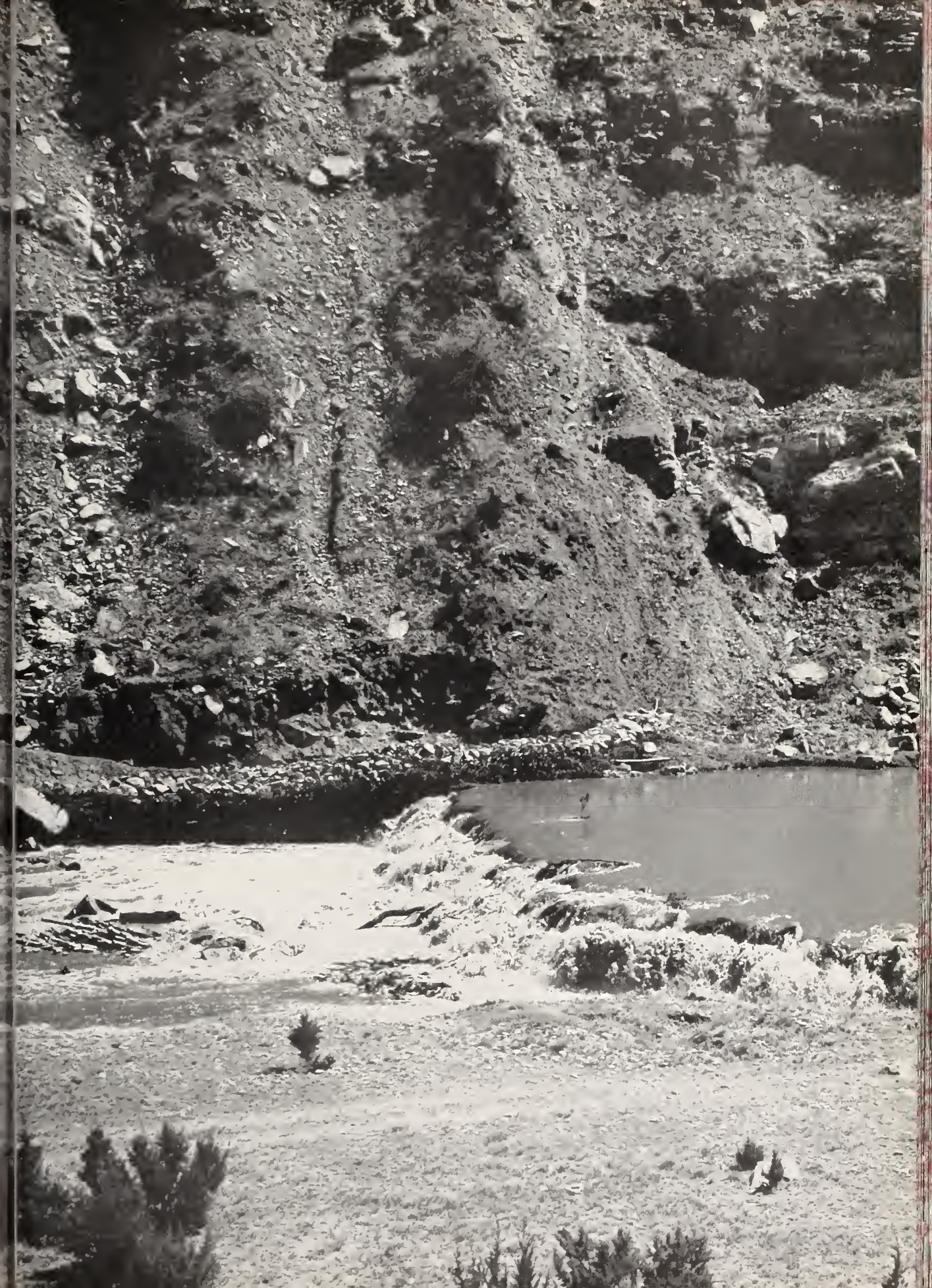
## MAKING A LIVING

Agriculture today is not very different from what it was 50 years ago here in the valley. As before, almost all crops are grown on the irrigated land. The only real change is that the staple crops are now corn, alfalfa, and beans instead of corn, alfalfa, and wheat.

As always, the dam and the main ditch—the “Madre Acequia”—are the basis of all agriculture in the valley. Without irrigation there would be no food, no feed, no livestock. Older than the village itself, the dam is a flimsy affair needing constant repairs.

It is 2 miles up the river. Here the ditch branches off from the stream. It fills more gradually than the river, until, by the time it reaches the village, it is several feet above the river level.







Each year the major-domo, or ditch boss, enlists the help of every man in the village to clean out the Madre Acequia and its tributaries.

Those who help can take water whenever they need it.



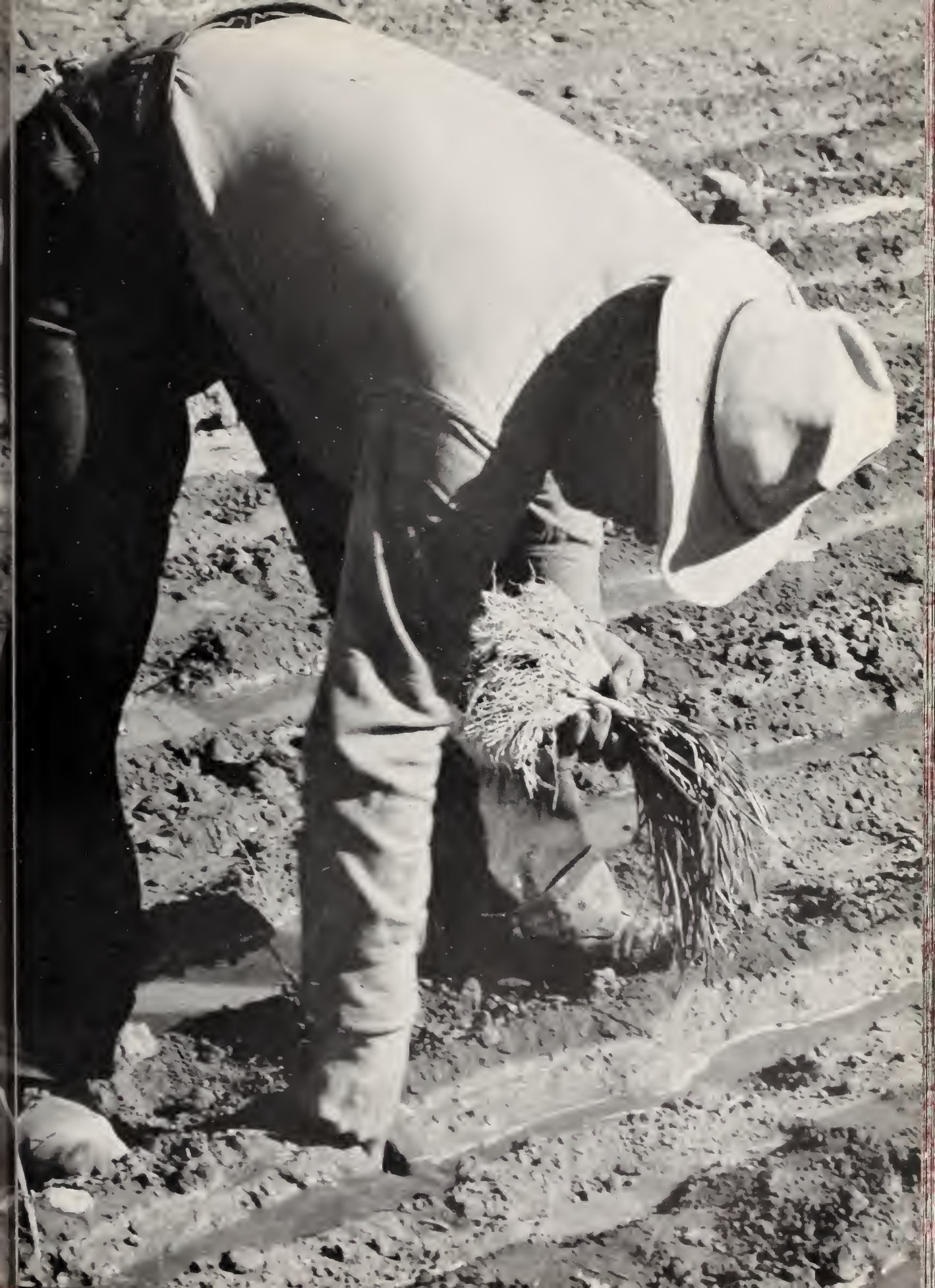
Newly plowed fields are flooded . . .





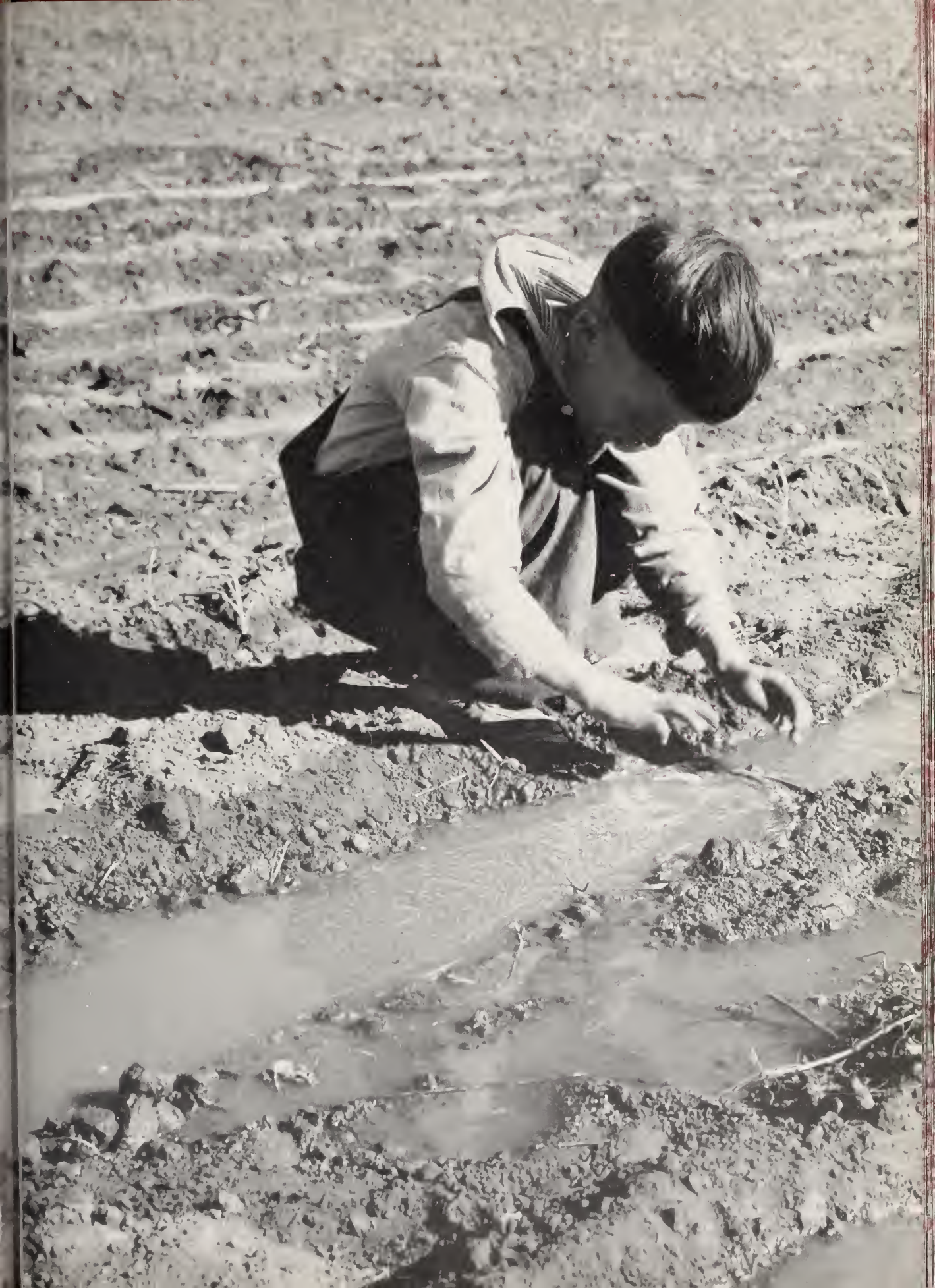


. . . to set out onions.



The child's play parallels the father's work.





Now, in April,

spring plowing gets under way . . .





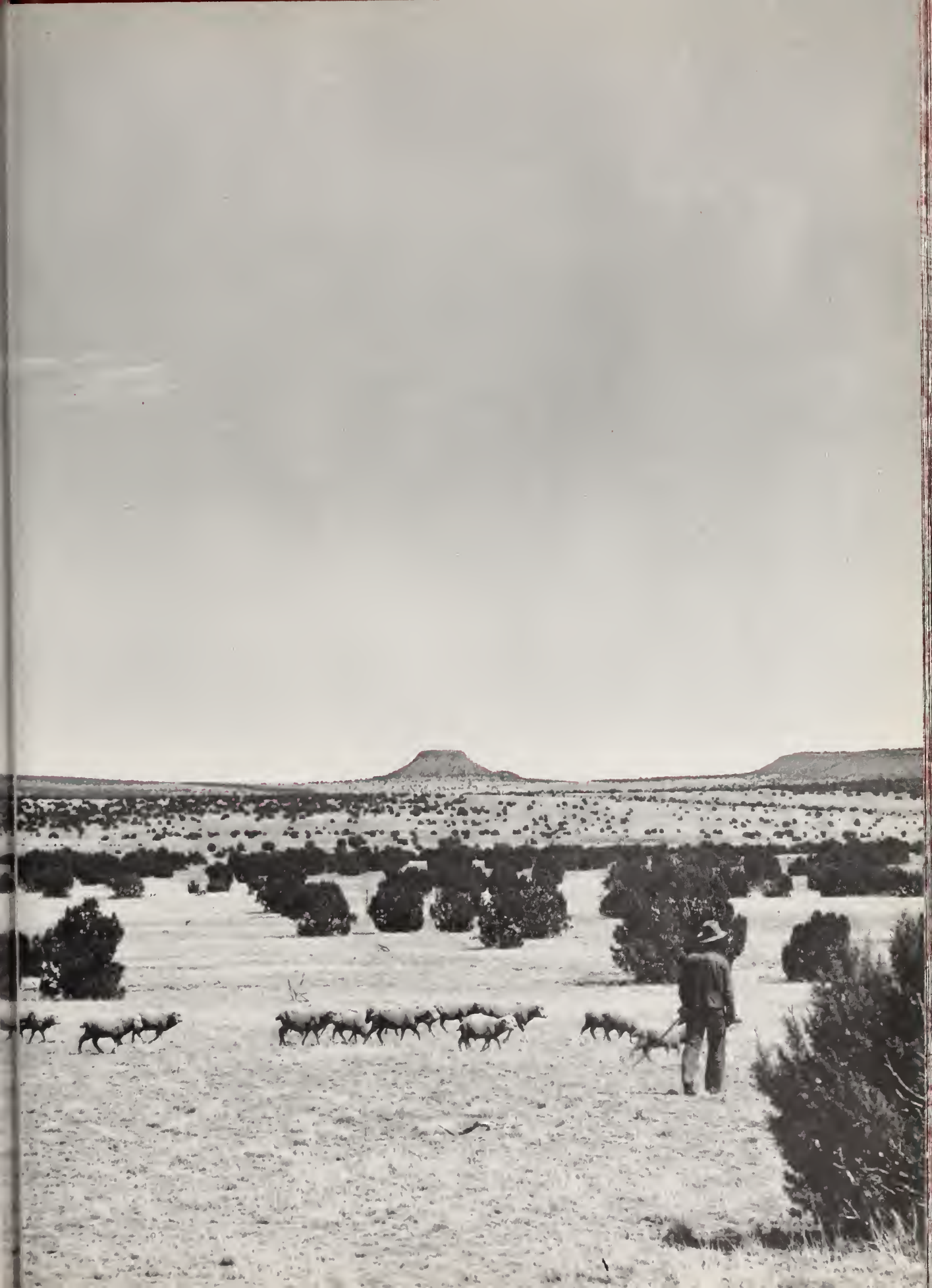


and men are putting barnyard manure on  
their land—a custom of long standing.



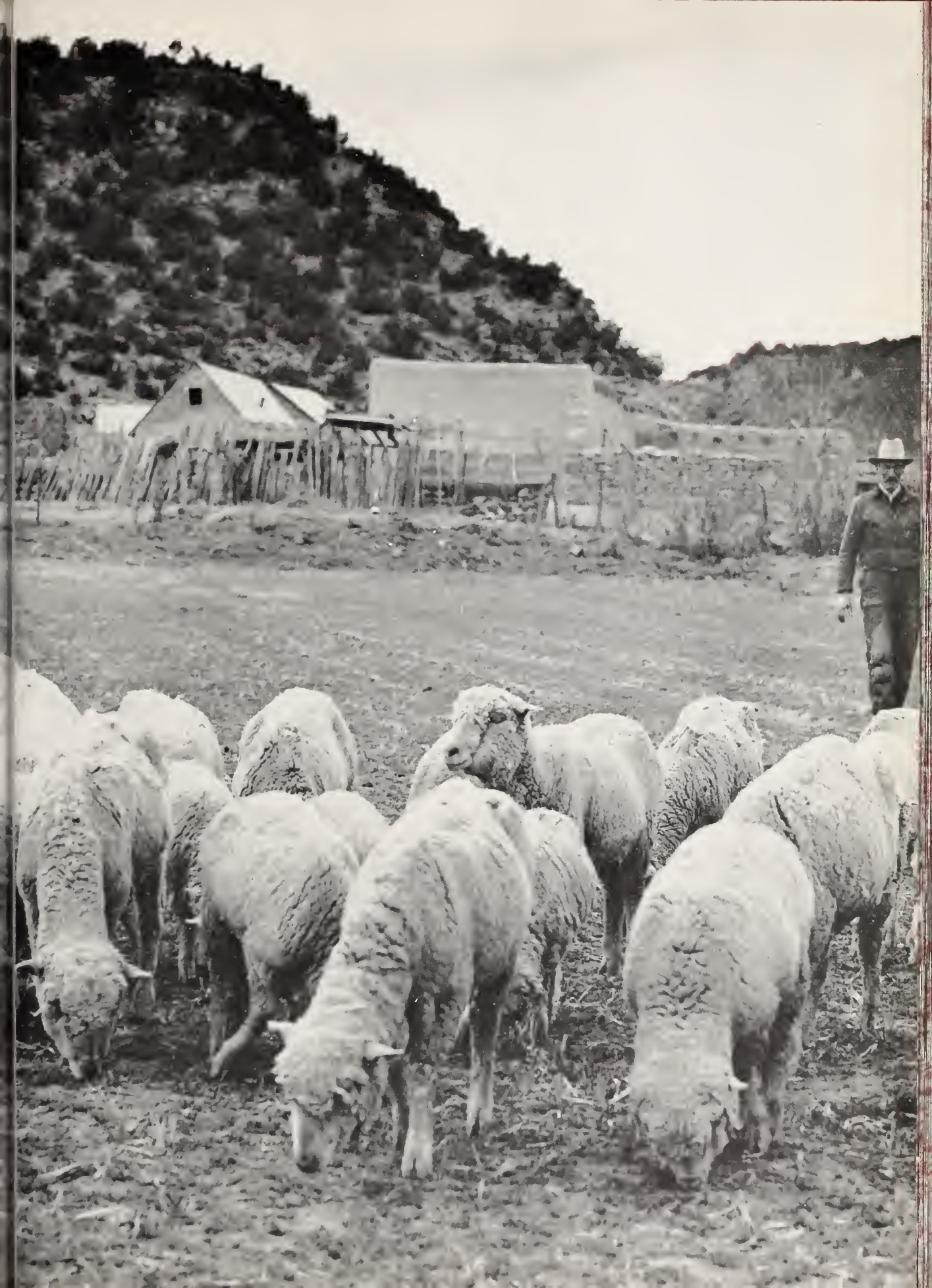
Two families still own sheep. The flocks  
graze on the mesa, usually . . .





but this year the pasture was so poor that they grew thin and weak and had to be brought down into the valley where there was a little green grass on the fields that were not yet plowed.







Even so, there are often sights bad to see.



The sheds and corrals are in the village. No one owns much livestock, so they need not be large.

Then, too, people here do much of their traveling by wagon and want their horses or mules close at hand.





The sheds are like the sheds of their fore-  
fathers . . .







. . . at once rough and ingenious, . . .



. . . others were once homes. Even deserted buildings are put to some use, for usable land is at a premium.

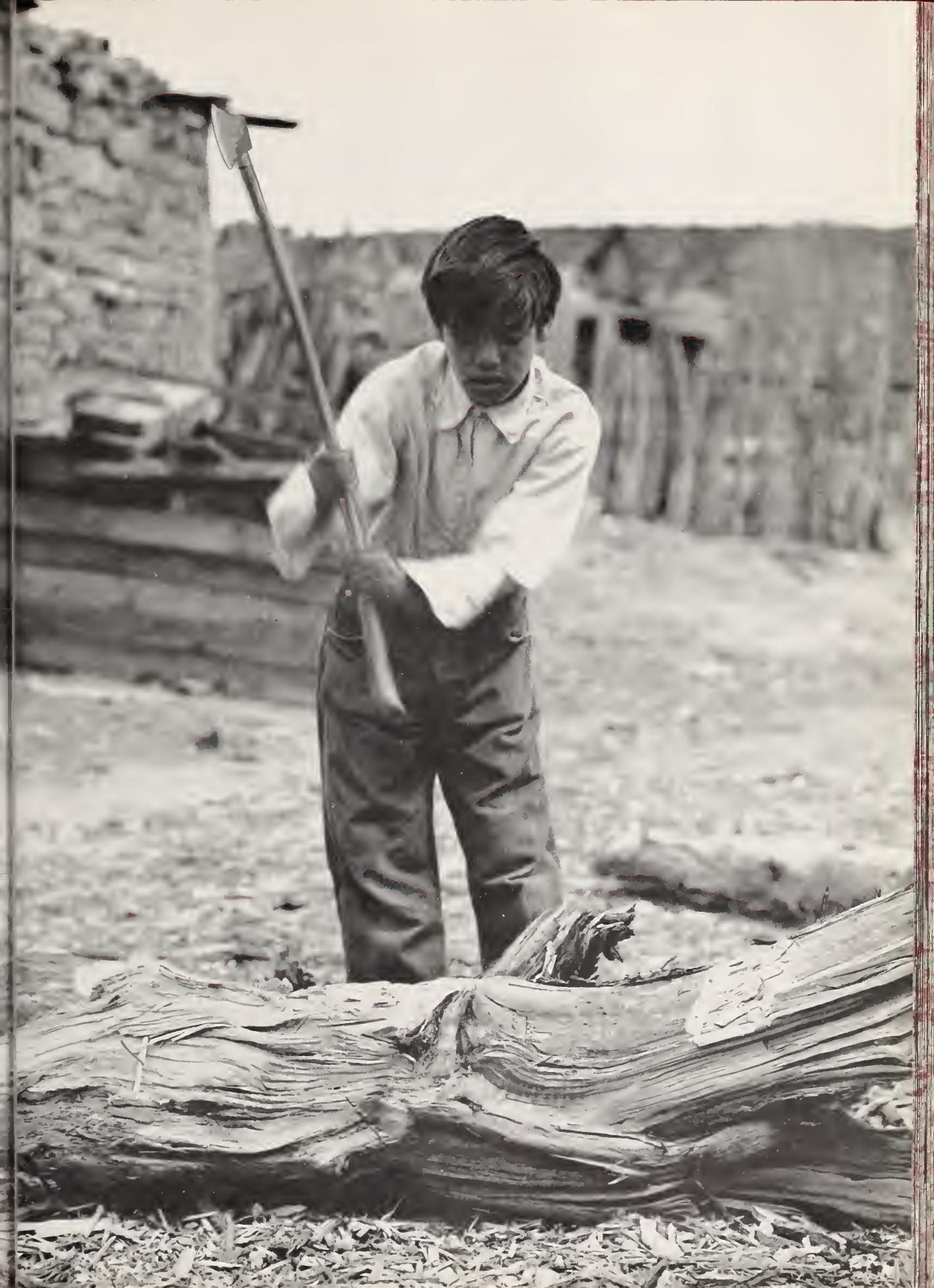




There are always regular daily or weekly chores, subject only to the weather and to the Church. It is bad luck to work in the fields on a holy day.

Little boys chop juniper, cedar, and piñon for their mothers' stoves; . . .







others get water for the house—silt-colored ditch water for both washing and drinking.

There is no spring here, and there is the threat of typhoid.



Women do their washing in tin tubs and  
hang the clothes in their yards . . .





and make bread in Indian beehive ovens.

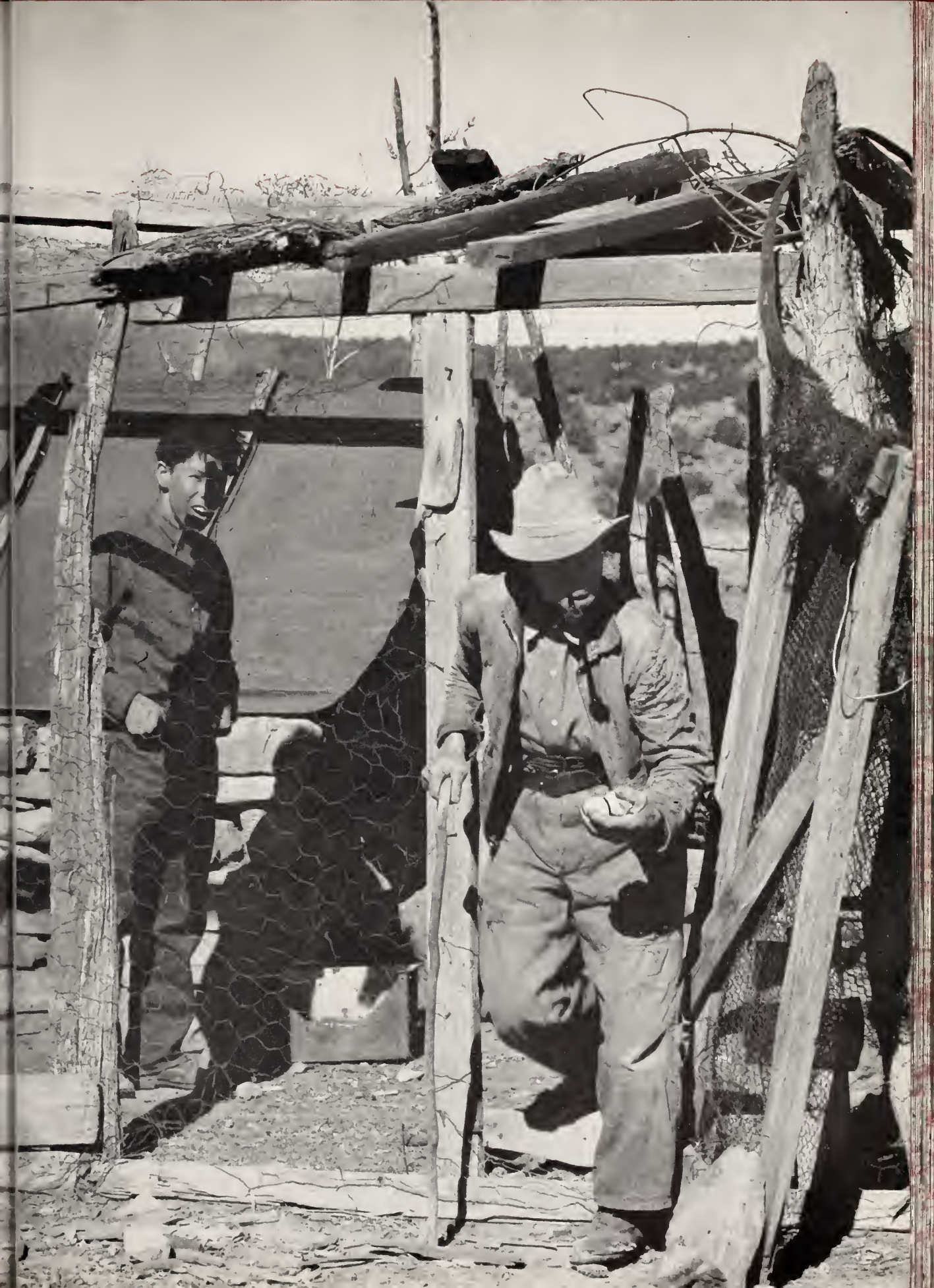
Once the village grew its own wheat and milled its own flour. Now people find it safer to grow beans and buy their wheat.







There are eggs to be gathered each day.  
Families have 8 to 10 hens, kept for the  
eggs they produce.



They are too valuable to kill, except on  
great occasions.





Once in a while a sheep is butchered.







Men repair their possessions until there is  
nothing left to repair.



They make new parts to replace old ones.

These are very poor people living to themselves; they have neither the money nor the opportunity to hire work done.





But this sort of agriculture, and self-sufficiency, is not enough. The men must earn a little money.

Now, there are only a few ways to bring in cash. Men can load their wagons with fence posts or firewood, drive to Las Vegas, come back 2 or 3 days later with some provisions and a dollar or so.







And there are the WPA jobs, lifesavers for many. There are few private jobs for these people, and they have little chance to sell their services. People of the village have almost no land or livestock left, but their needs are greater than ever. They must earn money, and they earn it as best they can.



## THE CHURCH

Everyone here is a Catholic and everyone wants to live according to the rules and teachings of the Church.

Though the village has no priest of its own, services are held regularly.





They have done all they can to make their church beautiful, though they cannot afford to give expensive presents.

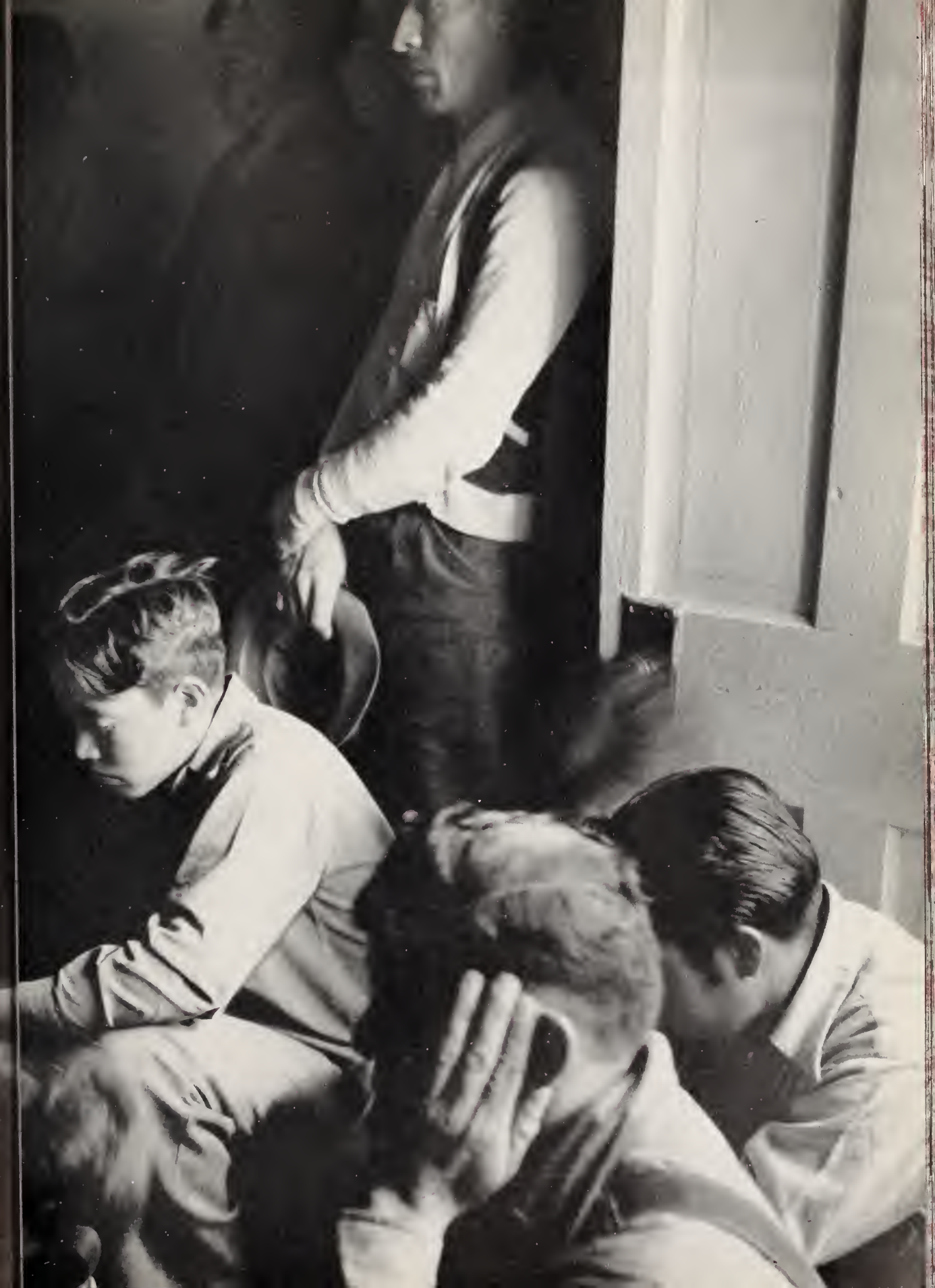
On Good Friday the figures on the altar are clothed in black. On the next Sunday there are flowers and the black coverings are removed.





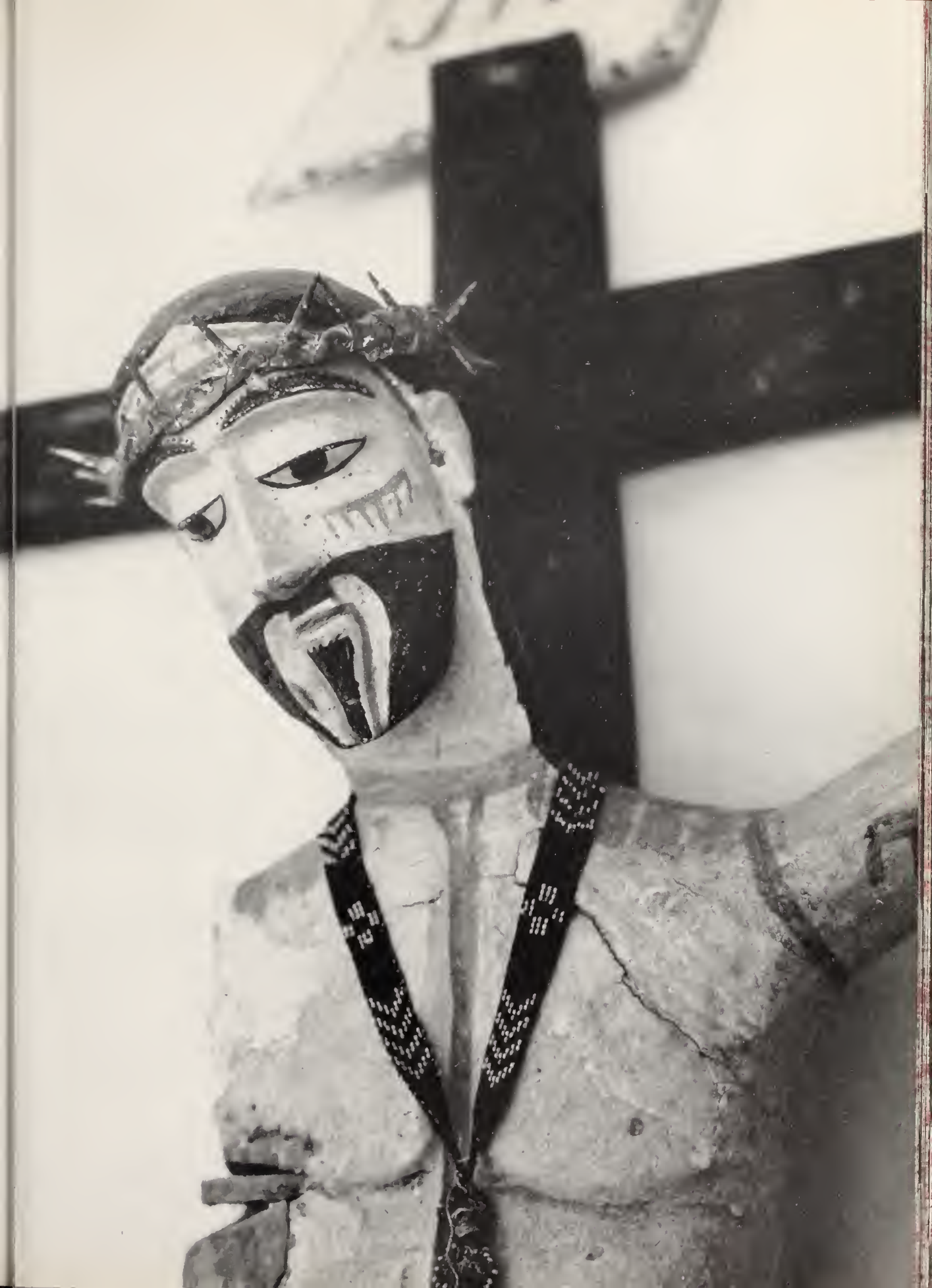


Most men and boys kneel in the back of  
the church.



The Christ hangs in the confessional. It is very old. Newer ones, generally store bought, are much more conventional.





Men get together for a half hour of talk after the service. This is almost as much a part of going to church as the service itself.





Every home has its shrine, though most are less elaborate than this one.

Even the calendars are decorated with religious pictures.



During Holy Week children carry food to their neighbors, receive other kinds of food in return.

The Church binds families together, as well as to itself.





In death as in life,

they are in the church.







## THE HOME AND THE FAMILY

The families who have always lived in the village welcome to their homes those who show good will. They are by nature friendly, courteous people.

A few who have lived for a while in some Anglo town are suspicious.



Most of the pictures in the rooms are religious. The rest are usually family portraits.





Here, the family, including even distant relatives, is almost a sacred institution.





The rooms are clean and simply furnished. Wallpaper is uncommon, though many walls are tinted.



There is nearly always space enough in the homes, especially as some members of most families are away working for day wages.





In an old-type house the doors have no jambs and the roof beams show. The effect is very simple and very fine.





A wood-burning stove and cheap enamelware make up about all the equipment the housewives have for their kitchens.

There is no refrigeration, and perishables are cooked in small quantities.

There is usually plenty to eat, but kinds of food are few. Those who can afford them sometimes add canned goods to their usual diet.

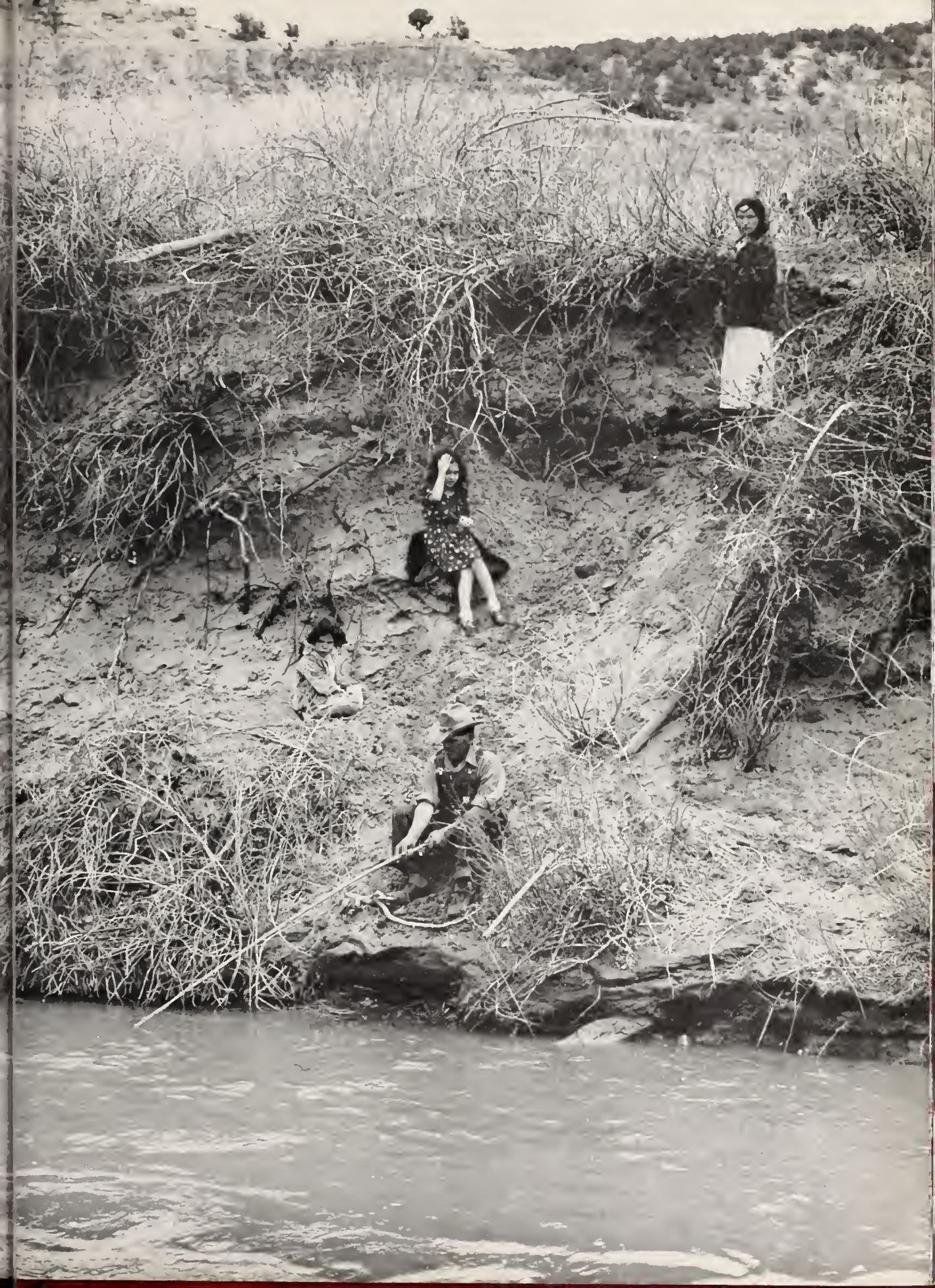


## FOR FUN

Recreation here is simple and limited. Older people go to town once in a while, but they have no money to spend on such luxuries as movies.

Often there is a dance in the village. When there is, everyone goes to it and has a fine time. Then, there is fishing in the river, . . .







and horse racing . . .





. . . and music . . .



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and the games you see children playing with sticks or stones or old tires, games they invent themselves.





## THE SCHOOL

The school at El Cerrito is very poor and has little equipment. It was built to serve 30 or 40 pupils.

All of the teaching is supposed to be done in English; but the children know that their teachers speak Spanish, and so are not forced to break away from their mother tongue. Many of them have very little English even after years at school.







The people understand that, despite its isolation, their village is coming to depend on the outside world.



They feel that their school is important because there the children can begin to learn English and something about the ways of this other society that surrounds them.





## YET TO COME . . .

The future of this boy, and of his family, and of other Spanish-American families everywhere, will depend on their ability to make changes, . . .





. . . even though these changes may affect  
their religious life, . . .



. . . their life on the land, . . .





. . . and their life together.

It has taken generations of living to build up the patterns that hold the people of these villages together, but they were built, many of them, on a foundation of natural resources that no longer exist.

Unless the old ways can somehow be made to support the people, they will have to go out into the towns and cities of the Anglos and make for themselves a new life based on, instead of isolated from, the new and changing conditions of the world of today.







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